

Lesson 6: The Plagues and The Passover (Exodus 5-12)

To Serve the Lord

The first chapters of Exodus establish the theme of service (*avad*) to the Lord. This is the work of the chosen people and it is why God wants Moses to draw the Israelites away from Egypt. God wants the people to give worship (*avad*) to Him. This worship comes in the form of liturgy (religious ritual) but it also comes in the form of obedience. The Mosaic Law has not yet been given so the laws under which the Israelites live are relatively few. Certainly there is the natural law, which is part of creation itself (do not murder or deal unjustly with one another, worship God, etc.), but there was also the law to circumcise. Circumcision, remember, was given to Abraham as the sign of entrance into the covenant.¹²⁹ With this in mind it is possible to make sense of a strange episode at this point in the story. The Scripture says, “At a lodging place on the way the Lord met him and sought to kill him.”¹³⁰ God is calling Moses to lead the people out of slavery to worship their God, and yet He now has ideas of killing Moses. Why?

Moses is sent to call the Israelites back to fidelity to God and the covenant, and yet we discover that Moses himself is not living out the covenant as evidenced by the fact that he has not circumcised his own son.¹³¹ The wrath of God here is a judgment provoked by a violation of the covenant. Moses was living as an Egyptian. He did not have his son circumcised on the eighth day as prescribed, but was likely waiting until his son turned thirteen (in imitation of Ishmael) as was custom with the Egyptians and other cultures of the day. This is a gross violation of the covenant. Fortunately, Moses’ wife, Zipporah, fixes the situation, saves the family, and by implication the entire mission. So we see, a woman is needed to save the day. The message is clear: loving and serving the Lord means obedience.

This rite of circumcision is a divine mandate to fulfill the covenant. It is not something that God takes lightly, to be done at convenience, but is essential to the Old Testament covenant. This is, in some respects, similar to the rite of baptism of the Christian church. We can say that baptism is to the Christian what circumcision was to the Old Testament people. That is, it is the doorway by which we enter into the covenant. Additionally, we see with Moses that ministry to one’s own family takes precedence over ministry to a congregation. If we want to live within the covenant we should first fulfill our obligations within our own family before we attend to the needs of the broader community. Moses made the mistake of neglecting the covenant within his own family, which nearly cost his ability to fulfill his wider mission. So we see, God is interested in first forming Moses so that he may be a worthy instrument for the good of all the people.

Having re-established the sign of the covenant (circumcision) God sends Aaron, Moses’ brother, to Moses. The two of them go back to the Israelites and tell the people God’s message. Amazingly, the people believe. This docility is in sharp contrast to Pharaoh’s

¹²⁹ Genesis 17:9-14

¹³⁰ Exodus 4:24

¹³¹ Exodus 4:25-26

hardness of heart. Whereas the Egyptians reject Moses and Yahweh, the people of Israel believe.¹³²

Finally Moses approaches Pharaoh and asks that the Israelites be allowed to go into the wilderness for three days “that they may hold a feast” for their God.¹³³ “But Pharaoh said, ‘Who is the Lord, that I should heed his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go.’”¹³⁴ Again, Pharaoh is employing the Hebrew word *yada*, which implies an acknowledgment of God’s authority. The difficult thing for Moses is that Pharaoh does not just deny the request but increases the Israelites’ workload. To make sure there is no leisurely thought of Yahweh Pharaoh makes the people work harder and longer. The fallout is that the Israelites now resent Moses. Moses was to be their liberator, but now they must suffer more because of him. Moses went in one day from being held in high esteem to rejection. In this Moses clearly anticipates what will happen with Christ. On Palm Sunday Jesus is honored as king (“Hosanna in the highest”), only to be condemned to death by the very same people just days later (“Crucify him!”).

The reaction of the people causes Moses to be anxious.¹³⁵ Moses is stressed and overwhelmed – not much of a leader – Pharaoh will not listen and the Hebrews are disgusted with him. Yet, had not the Lord that precisely this would happen?¹³⁶ But God again responds with words of assurance, “I am with you.” God renews His promise and gives Moses seven encouraging “I will’s.”¹³⁷ These are promises that God will lead the people out from Egypt to the land of Canaan. It is here that for the first time “redemption” is used, which will become a key theme for the story of salvation.¹³⁸ These promises must have been consoling, but in light of the increased persecution under Pharaoh, Moses may have been wondering just how is this going to happen. If anything, the situation is just getting worse, not better. We will see a transformation in Moses from a man who is not faithful to the law and anxious about God’s plans, to a man of obedience and strong faith. Once Moses learns to be calm in the face of difficulties and to trust God, then the Lord will work through him. This is a good lesson for us today. Peacefulness is an important part of doing God’s will. We must learn to trust and be at peace, and then God will work in our lives.

The Plagues

God does not waste any time. Immediately after He renews His promise He goes to work on Pharaoh.¹³⁹ To understand the context of what will occur with Pharaoh and Egypt we must remember the key term *yada* (“to know” in Hebrew). The term, recall, means more

¹³² Exodus 4:27-31

¹³³ Exodus 5:1

¹³⁴ Exodus 5:2

¹³⁵ Exodus 5:22

¹³⁶ Exodus 3:19; 4:21

¹³⁷ Exodus 6:6-8

¹³⁸ Exodus 6:6

¹³⁹ It is important to remember that in the Covenant it is God who always takes the initiative. The people respond and derive benefit from the Covenant, but it is God who is the first to act. Salvation is not a human enterprise, but an act of God that He initiates.

than an intellectual knowledge but signifies a much deeper meaning. To *yada* God is not simply to be aware of his existence, for this is mostly taken for granted in the ancient Hebrew cultures. To *yada* God is to recognize Him for what He is, the sovereign Lord who makes demands of obedience, especially from His chosen people, with whom He has made a covenant. Yahweh is the one, true God whose holiness and loving kindness are “known” in the experience of the nation and the individual. The unique criterion of this knowledge is obedience, and its opposite is not simply ignorance but a willful turning away from God. Additionally, the “knowledge” of God’s claims involves a rejection of the pagan gods, knowing that they are not gods. And so when Pharaoh says, “I do not know (*yada*) the Lord,” he is saying he and Egypt do not recognize Yahweh and will not be obedient to Him.¹⁴⁰

For the next five chapters of Exodus we see a series of ten plagues come down on Egypt.¹⁴¹ Most of us are at least partially familiar with the drama of the plagues. It is rightly one of the key events of salvation history that captures the imagination. The common understanding of the plagues, however, generally misses their essential point. Throughout this narrative *yada* is used eight times to explain the purpose of the plagues.¹⁴² This emphasis on *knowing the Lord* is very different from the normal interpretation of the plagues being a chastisement on the people of Egypt. The plagues are not primarily God’s revenge on Pharaoh. The divine purpose, rather, is that Pharaoh and the Egyptians – to say nothing of the Israelites – will acquire *knowledge* of the one, true God, and it will be a knowledge based on personal experience rather than hearsay. We see, then, that there is a pedagogical purpose to the plagues. The ten plagues are God’s catechetical program for an ancient world steeped in pagan idolatry. They are meant to teach Israel and Egypt to *know* that the Lord is God and that there is no other.

Each of the ten plagues is not some random act of violence against the Egyptian people but a precise condemnation of a specific Egyptian god (a smart bomb if you will). The ten plagues are as follows: turning the Nile River to blood (7:14-25); swarms of frogs (8:1-15); gnats or lice (8:16-19); swarms of flies (8:20-32); plague upon the cattle (9:1-8); boils on man and beast (9:8-12); hail, thunder and lightening (9:13-35); locusts (10:1-20); three days of darkness (10:21-29); death of the firstborn male (11:1-12:36). The Egyptians worship just about every object in nature that represents life, and each of these plagues is a judgment on a particular pagan god of the Egyptians. As the text itself says, “For I will pass through the land of Egypt...and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments.”¹⁴³

For example, the first plague, turning the Nile into blood, is a judgment on the Egyptian god *Hapi*, who was the god of the Nile River and a cause of fertility. The Egyptians, in their polytheistic and pantheistic faith, worshipped the Nile as divine. Thus, when

¹⁴⁰ Exodus 5:2

¹⁴¹ By emphasizing the difficulties involved in leaving Egypt, the sacred writer is preparing the reader to appreciate how great God’s intervention is.

¹⁴² Exodus 6:7; 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29; 10:2

¹⁴³ Exodus 12:12; see also Numbers 33:4

Yahweh turns it into blood, it as if He is saying, “I have killed your god *hapi*.”¹⁴⁴ (*Hapi* is no longer happy.) The plague of frogs condemns the Egyptian practice of worshipping the god *Hek* under the form of frogs. Now, this may seem like a very strange and irrational practice, but these frogs naturally dug themselves into the mud of the river and would hibernate for months at a time. The Egyptians did not understand the science of hibernation and believed the frogs would actually die and come back to life. Hence, frogs have divine power. As part of the worship, it was forbidden to kill a frog (at the penalty of death), so when the swarm of frogs comes down on Egypt they literally shut down cities and all commerce out of fear of any Egyptian stepping on a frog and killing it. So we see that this plague is more than an inconvenience, but another way of Yahweh condemning the idolatry of a mere creature (a pretty simple one at that).¹⁴⁵ And so with the remaining plagues are similar condemnations of Egyptian worship of false gods.

There is a curious episode after the fourth plague. Pharaoh tells Moses, “Go, sacrifice to your God within the land.”¹⁴⁶ This might have sounded like a possible compromise but Moses is too wise to accept the proposal. If the Israelites had offered their sacrifice to Yahweh among the Egyptian people, it would have led to a massive slaughter of Israeli blood since in the prescribed sacrifice they would have killed one of the animals that the Egyptians worshipped and therefore committed a capital crime. And so the plagues continue.

The ninth plague comes in the form of “a darkness to be felt.”¹⁴⁷ The darkness was in part a condemnation of the sun god, *re*, but it also is an image of the darkness that blanketed their souls. They lived in the darkness of sin, and now they experience it. How they live spiritually is what they experience physically. The Book of Wisdom says, “While over those men alone heavy night was spread, an image of the darkness that was destined to receive them; but still heavier than darkness were they to themselves.”¹⁴⁸ It is also interesting to note that each plague is spaced seven days apart on the Sabbath as if to say, “You should be worshipping and resting, not working,” in order to teach them who is truly holy and worthy of the Sabbath. Again, what God desires for his people is the spiritual freedom needed to enable them to worship (*avad*) Him.

All these plagues are meant to show Egypt that they worship false gods and that only Yahweh is truly God. The plagues, however, are also meant to instruct Israel. The Israelites had lived in Egypt for centuries, and over time they adopted the pagan practices of the Egyptians and worshipped these false gods. Israel had been in Egypt so long that they had begun to absorb the idolatrous ways of the Egyptians and their religion of nature, fertility, power, wealth and pleasure. Through these gods the powers of darkness promised to give earthly affluence and influence in exchange for one’s eternal destiny.

¹⁴⁴ Wisdom 11:7 interprets this first plague as God’s just response to the killing of Hebrew children by drowning in the Nile.

¹⁴⁵ Wisdom 15:18-16:1 speaks about the worship of ugly animals and that for those who fall into such worship, punishment will come through these very creatures. This, no doubt, is harkening back to the worship of frogs and other pagan practices of the Egyptians.

¹⁴⁶ Exodus 8:25

¹⁴⁷ Exodus 10:21

¹⁴⁸ Wisdom 17:21

God wants the Egyptians and the Israelites to have an experiential knowledge that He alone is God. If they want to be faithful to the covenant, they must detach themselves from their pagan habits. This is true for us today. If we want God in our lives, we must detach ourselves from the things that get in the way of hearing and doing the will of God.¹⁴⁹

After the plague of darkness Pharaoh is willing to let Moses and the Israelites go and “serve the Lord” but with the restriction that they may not take any animals for sacrifice. This is unacceptable to Moses since part of the worship Yahweh requires is the sacrifice of the Egyptian gods, which cattle are chief among. The brief negotiations break down and “the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let them go.”¹⁵⁰ This sets the stage for the tenth and final plague.

The Passover

The tenth plague, the death of firstborn, is the most important event of the Exodus and Old Testament salvation history. The Passover will become the one event that the Old Testament people will refer to as the most significant sign of God’s saving action. It will also be the context within which Jesus establishes the New Covenant and brings to completion God’s saving will. The last plague has many unique aspects to it that are worth noting. First, every plague relates to a judgment on one of the Egyptian gods. The tenth plague is a judgment against the god Apis. The Apis cult is the worship of a calf, the child of a bull. Pharaoh is worshipped as a god under the sign of the bull and his firstborn son under the sign of a calf. Part of the ritual worship within the Apis cult is a large orgy that the firstborn son takes a prominent role. Hence, the death of the firstborn is a judgment against his deification and the rite of pagan worship that surrounds him.

Second, this is the only plague that requires the Israelites to do something in order to avoid it. This suggests guilt on their part as well as the Egyptians. God requires three things in order to be saved from the tenth plague: 1) sacrifice an unblemished lamb; 2) pour its blood on the household’s doorpost; 3) eat the lamb.¹⁵¹ Why all this bloody sacrifice? Is Yahweh cruel and masochistic? No. God knows what His children need, even if what they need is very unpleasant medicine. The objective is to wean Israel from Egyptian worship, as the prophet Ezekiel says, “Cast away the detestable things your eyes feast on, every one of you, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.”¹⁵² Israel must prove that they are loyal to Yahweh by killing the Egyptian gods.

By ordering the Israelites to place the blood of the slaughtered lamb on the doorpost, God is saying in effect, “Burn your bridges with these people. If you stay the evidence of the blood on the doorpost will easily convict you of deicide and you will be put to death.”

¹⁴⁹ Classically, growth in the spiritual life can be divided into three phases, the first of which is detachment from sin (“the purgative age”). Before we are capable of infused knowledge or union of our hearts with God (the second and third phases respectively), we must remove our attachment to sin.

¹⁵⁰ Exodus 10:27

¹⁵¹ Exodus 12

¹⁵² Ezekiel 20:7

Wood is extremely porous, so by marking the doorpost with blood, they are making an undeniable sign that this family participated in the sacrifice of an Egyptian god and is guilty of a capital crime. This is in part why Yahweh also instructs them to eat the meal wearing sandals and equipped for a quick escape – as soon as the Egyptians discover what has happened, the Israelites will no doubt need to run for their lives.

It should not be dismissed how courageous an act this is for the Israelites. To kill the lamb takes great faith and trust in Yahweh. If Yahweh does not come to their help after the sacrifice of the lamb the Israelites will all be killed under Egyptian law. By killing the lamb they are in essence swearing allegiance to Yahweh. God requires all of this not because He needs sacrifices but because of what the people need. They need to root out idolatry, and so God requires them to sacrifice the gods they have been worshipping. Only by literally killing the gods of Egypt do the Israelites purify themselves before Yahweh.

It is tempting to think we are beyond such base attachments to false gods and idol worship, and yet if we look at our modern culture it is easy to see that many of us worship wealth, power, sex and other created goods in place of proper worship of the one, true God. Just as the Israelites grew comfortable in their idolatry, many of us may feel the need to hang onto our selfishness and idolatry. This is why it is important to frequently reflect on our lives to determine whether we may be growing attached to things other than God. We must, as the saints tell us, detach ourselves from the things that keep us from God if we ever want to have an intimate relationship with our Creator and Heavenly Father.

Jesus and the Passover

The Passover is a key moment in the Old Testament, but it is also essential to unlocking the mission of Christ. The Catechism says, “By celebrating the Last Supper with his apostles in the course of the Passover meal, Jesus gave the Jewish Passover its definitive meaning. Jesus’ passing over to his Father by his death and Resurrection, the new Passover, is anticipated in the Supper and celebrated in the Eucharist, which fulfills the Jewish Passover of the Church in the glory of the kingdom.”¹⁵³

Jesus is the fulfillment of the first Passover. He is the firstborn Son who is slain, the Lamb without blemish or broken bones, the one who is sacrificed whose blood is sprinkled, and the Lamb of God whose body must be eaten. Through our participation in the Sacred Mass, we sit at the table of the Passover and eat the unblemished Lamb so that we might be set free from the slavery to sin and death.

¹⁵³ CCC, #1340